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Agenda Setting and Active Audiences in Online Coverage of Human Trafficking

Maria Eirini Papadouka,¹ Nicholas Evangelopoulos,² and Gabe Ignatow³

Abstract

Online news platforms and social media increasingly influence the public agenda on social issues such as human trafficking. Yet despite the popularity of online news and the availability of sophisticated tools for analyzing digital texts, little is known about the relations between news coverage of human trafficking and audiences' reactions to and interpretations of such coverage. In this paper we examine journalists' and commenters' topic choices in coverage and discussion of human trafficking in the British newspaper *The Guardian* from 2009-14. We use Latent Semantic Analysis to identify eleven topics discussed by both journalists and readers, and analyze each topic in terms of the degree to which journalists and readers agree or disagree in their topic preferences. We find that four topics were preferred equally by journalists and commenters, four were preferred by journalists, and three were preferred by commenters. Our findings suggest that theories of "agenda setting" and of the "active audience" are not mutually exclusive, and the scope of explanation of each depends partly on the specific topic or subtopic that is analyzed.

Keywords: human trafficking, online news, agenda setting, active audience, topic models, Latent Semantic Analysis

Word count: 8123

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Introduction

Human trafficking, driven in part by economic globalization (Danailova-Trainor and Belser 2006), is considered to be one of the fastest growing and most lucrative criminal enterprises in the world. In 2000 the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, represented the main international instrument in the fight against transnational organized crime (United Nations 2000). However, this was not the first time where the issue of human trafficking was discussed in the international scene. In September 1995, the United Nations held the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. At this meeting clear guidance was provided and certain actions were introduced including the enforcement of international conventions on human trafficking and slavery, and the setting of effective law enforcement and of institutions aiming to eliminate trafficking in both national and international level. Moreover, educational and rehabilitation programs were implemented in order to inform society and to support the medical and psychological needs of the human trafficking victims.

In parallel to these efforts the United Nations and other international nongovernmental organizations began to focus on raising public awareness of human trafficking as a global social problem, and national civil society organizations have followed suit (e.g. Aronowitz 2009: 147).

For most citizens the news media are the only source of information and opinion on human trafficking. As a consequence national and international media play critical “agenda setting” and “gatekeeping” roles (Ghanem 1997: 5) in raising public awareness, even though media coverage of human trafficking is often criticized for being limited, inconsistent, and distorted. Wallinger (2010: 15) has shown that human trafficking incidents are reported by the media only when news editors evaluate them as “newsworthy.” As a result media coverage of human trafficking focuses narrowly on trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation

(Marchionni 2012; Pajnik 2010; Chang and Kim 2007) to the exclusion of many other forms of trafficking. Also, even this monolithic equation of human trafficking to sexual exploitation, can be easily affected and even distorted by the ongoing debates on voluntary versus coerced sex working, especially in this current era where many countries have accepted, legalized or decriminalized sex working by promoting the volunteer sex workers rights (Immordino and Russo 2015; Jahic and Finckenauer 2005; Limoncelli 2010; Marchionni 2012).

Before the rise of the Internet the public agenda on human trafficking was generally set by legacy news outlets such as large-circulation newspapers and network television (Ghanem 1997; Gulati 2011). But the “we write, you read” doctrine of modern journalism (Deuze 2003) began to be challenged in the 1990s by the “public,” “participatory,” “civic,” or “citizen journalism” movement (Domingo et al. 2008; Haas 2005, 2007; Thurman 2006; Thurman and Lupton 2008). Today online news platforms and social media allow readers to play an active role in setting the public agenda on a wide variety of social issues (Hermida et al. 2011).

Despite the accessibility of online news and sophisticated methods for analyzing news content, little is known about the relations between news coverage of human trafficking, readers’ reactions to such news coverage, and the public discussions that result from interactions between journalists and their readers. The goal of the present study is thus to examine similarities and differences in how human trafficking is discussed by journalists and their readers. We examine journalists’ and readers’ topic choices in coverage of and discussion on human trafficking in the British daily newspaper *The Guardian*, collecting a large sample of articles and comments on human trafficking published between 2009 and 2014 and applying Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA) to identify the most salient topics of discussion. We analyze these topics quantitatively to determine which topics are preferred equally by journalists and commenters and which are

preferred by either journalists or commenters. We find four topics that were preferred equally by journalists and commenters, four that were preferred by journalists, and three that were preferred by commenters. Our findings suggest that that convergence and divergence depend on the topic under discussion and therefore the theoretical frameworks of “agenda setting” and the “active audience” work rather complementary, depending on the specific topic and subtopic being analyzed.

Agenda setting and the active audience

Theories of news agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw 1968) and of the active audience (Liebes and Katz 1986) are two of the most prominent approaches in research on how news and public opinion influence one another. One of the main assertions of agenda-setting theory is that “what the media find important, or salient, is what the public finds important” (Marchionni 2012). In different words, agenda setting is the selective coverage of topics that leads the public to perceive some issues as more important than others regardless of their inherent newsworthiness (Wanta et al. 2004; Wu 2009). A second aspect of agenda setting theory is known as “second-level agenda setting,” which is the idea that the mass media not only tell people *what* to think about certain issues but also *how* to think about them (McCombs and Shaw 1993). Second-level agenda setting surpasses the effect of relative salience of an issue and examines the two dimensions of the portrayal of that issue: its substance and affectivity (Coleman et al. 2009; Wu and Coleman 2009). Kiouisis et al.’s 2006 study of media coverage of political candidates’ news releases in shaping the salience of political issues and candidate images during the 2002 Florida gubernatorial elections includes examples of both types - or levels, of agenda setting.

Only a few studies have examined how news media set the public political agenda regarding human trafficking (Gulati 2011; Johnston, Friedman and Schafer 2014; Marchionni

2012; Pajnik 2010), and to our knowledge there have been no studies of how audiences respond to media coverage of human trafficking.

The second major approach to studying the interaction of the news and public opinion is the “active audience” approach. Public opinion on social issues is not only shaped by mass media but can also influence the agenda of the media and politics (Burstein 2003; Dalton 2013; Page 1983; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2011). Recent studies have disputed the view that public opinion is formed via passive consumption of media information; media studies researchers in particular have identified the active presence of audiences through their responsive and interpretive analysis of the meanings of media products (Liebes and Kats 1986, Hermida et al. 2011). Hermida suggests that journalists themselves perceive audiences as “active recipients...somewhere between passive receivers and active creators of content” (Hermida et al 2011: 17). This perception is enhanced by the journalists’ expectation that users will even participate in the news spreading, especially in this current era of global media and online social platforms. Therefore, audiences support their role of “active recipients” by observing newsworthy events and spreading the news afterwards by applying their personal filter (Hermida et al 2011).

Recent technological advances allow citizens with internet access to not only actively interpret and interact with web-based content, but also to broadcast their own interpretations of events (Domingo et al. 2008; Thurman 2008). The result is “user-generated content” (UGC), the “product of active internet contributors, who put in a certain amount of creative effort which is created outside of professional routines and platforms” (Van Dijck 2009: 41). One popular form of UGC is the comment fields that accompany many newspaper articles published online. Graham and Wright (2015) found that debates in The Guardian’s “below the line” comment fields in articles on the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit topic were often intensely deliberative, and

that these comment fields had a recognizable impact on climate change journalism. Commenters often challenged articles' content while providing new ideas and arguments (Graham and Wright 2015: 17). Yet despite their popularity and apparent significance, research on news article comment fields has so far been very limited.

Predictions

In this article we examine the topics discussed in articles covering the issue of human trafficking and their respective "below the line" comment fields in order to identify points of convergence and divergence. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the main topics discussed by both journalists and readers on the issue of human trafficking?
2. Are there topics on which journalists and readers converge? If so, what are these topics?
3. Are there topics on which journalists and readers diverge? If so, what are these topics?

The goal of our study is to determine whether, and how, the subject of human trafficking is approached differently by journalists and commenters. Deriving predictions from agenda setting and active audience theories is relatively straightforward. Starting from two seemingly contrasting theories, the agenda setting theory that implies that journalists' topic preferences will be reflected in the topic preferences of their readers; theories of the active audience suggest this will not necessarily be the case, and that readers' preferred topics will diverge from those of journalists. The theories are not mutually exclusive, of course, in that it is primarily journalists and editors who decide on article topics, and audiences' interpretations and comments are secondary. But we may learn about where each theory is most applicable by examining the relative degree of journalist-audience convergence and divergence across topics. Thus we analyze the topic preferences of journalists and readers simultaneously.

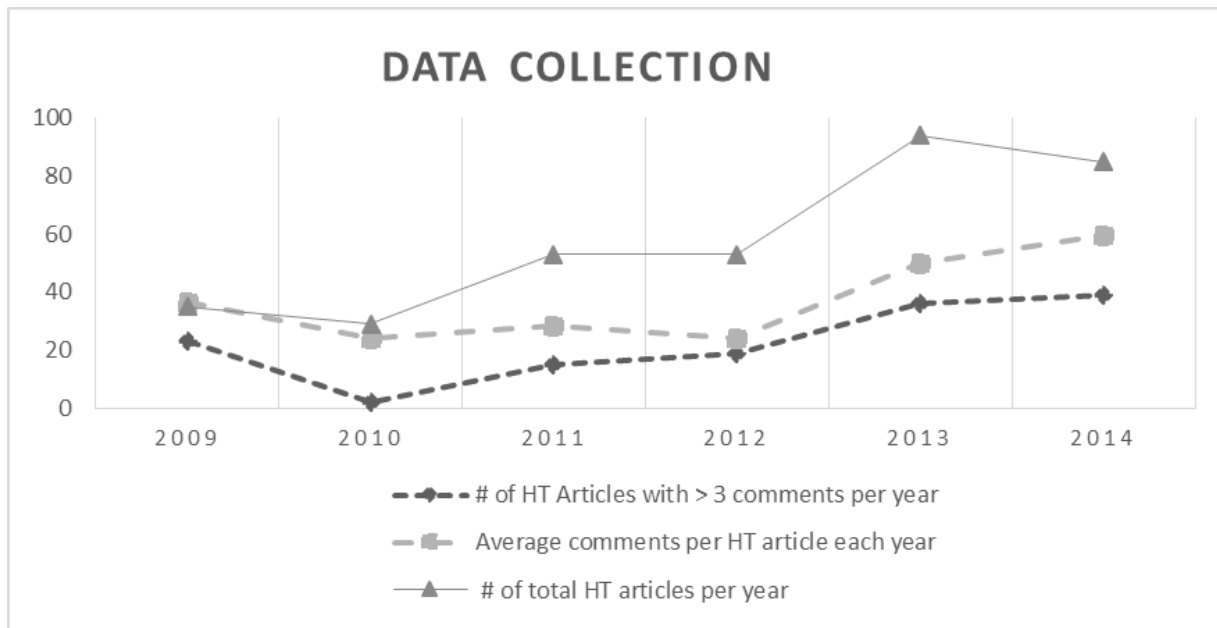
Data

Our data are from the British newspaper *The Guardian* for the period 2009 to 2014. We chose *The Guardian*, a British national daily newspaper, because it is a major international paper with an especially large portion of web readers from overseas (78% in 2004). For comparison, *The New York Times* received approximately 30% of its web readers from overseas, the *Huffington Post* around 20%, and the *Washington Post* around 17% in 2004 (Mayes 2004; Thurman 2007). This is indicative of the access of and potential comment' contribution from people from all over the globe on issues raised by *The Guardian* that have both national and international focus. Until recently *The Guardian's* circulation was approximately 39 million readers, the majority of whom were online readers (Thurman 2007: 8). It was one of the first newspapers to add a comment fields section, and today *The Guardian's* comments sections contain arguably the most extensive debates among leading international newspapers (Jönsson and Örnebring 2011; Ruiz et al. 2011). *The Guardian* also offers open access to readers, allowing readers to both read full articles and comment without registering. As a consequence *The Guardian* was the only major newspaper that provided us with sufficient data to perform statistical analysis of journalist and reader topic preferences on human trafficking.

To analyze topics discussed by both journalists and readers we concentrated on articles published between 2009 and 2014 that included more than three comments. We collected our data from late 2014 through early 2015 in order to explore the discussion between the journalists' most recent news stories on human trafficking and their readers' corresponding comments. In addition, for reasons related to our topic extraction methodology we excluded articles with few comments (three or fewer).

We used the *GuardianR: Guardian API Wrapper* (Bastos and Puschmann 2013) in order to construct our dataset. The output of the R terminal returned a total of 349 articles, with a total of 195 articles that allowed readers' comments in the webpage. Out of these, 134 articles contained more than three comments in their comment section and were therefore included in our dataset. Some of the final sample of 134 articles included well over 100 comments, but because online discussions often change focus and become fragmented after a few comments (Lu et al. 2010) we included only comments that appeared on the first results page, with one scroll-down, ordered oldest-first. This strategy yielded 134 articles with 6644 corresponding comments, with an average of 22 articles with more than three comments per year and an average of 37 comments per article in 2009, 24 comments per article in 2010, 28 in 2011, 24 in 2012, 50 in 2013, and 60 in 2014 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Articles and comments collected



Following best practices of text analytics, to improve the effectiveness of topic extraction we split the original articles and reader comments into paragraphs, based on our observation that

paragraphs generally cover one main topic each. To avoid biasing the topic extraction process, we kept the original paragraph structure as it appears in the published articles and the posted comments. The 134 articles produced 2399 article paragraphs, and the 6644 comments produced 10030 comment paragraphs, for a total of 13,329 paragraphs.

Method

To determine journalists' and commenters' topic preferences we applied topic modeling to our final corpus of 13,329 article and comment paragraphs. Topic modeling is a text mining methodology that has recently caught on with a wide range of researchers in the humanities and social sciences. Up to this day a widely-applied research method in social sciences, which is also preferred in most of the studies on articles published in mass communication journals, is content analysis. However, topic modeling approaches such as Latent Semantic Analysis and other automated techniques, are increasingly replacing the initial reading and coding, two labor-intensive steps in the content analysis process, mainly because of their flexibility to encompass and analyze large text corpora that can exceed a billion documents at times (Chuang et al. 2014). Topic modeling involves automated procedures for coding collections of documents into sets of meaningful categories which represent the main topics being discussed in the texts. Because algorithms can do this coding with minimal human intervention, topic modeling is more inductive than most other approaches to text analysis (DiMaggio et al. 2013). Instead of using predefined codes or categories derived from theory, researchers using topic modeling begin by specifying the number of topics they wish to find, and then use software to identify the specified number of topics based on either underlying probability distributions or patterns of explained variance. Topic modeling software then returns rank-ordered sets of words being used in each topic and provides

an accounting of the distribution of those topics across the document collection (Stayvers and Griffiths 2007).

Topic models assume that meanings are relational (Saussure 1959), and that the meanings associated with a topic of conversation can be understood as a set of word clusters. Topic models treat documents as what linguists call a “bag of words,” capturing word co-occurrences regardless of syntax, narrative, or location within a document (Cai et al. 2008). A topic can be thought of as the cluster of words that tend to come up in a discussion, and therefore to co-occur more frequently than they otherwise would, whenever the topic is being discussed. Topic models are, therefore, effective at uncovering meaning at the discourse or corpus level but not particularly effective for uncovering meaning within individual documents.

There are two main approaches to topic modeling. In the first, probabilistic topic modeling, the most widely used algorithm is Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). Introduced by Blei and his colleagues in 2003, LDA is based on the idea that every document within a document collection addresses a mixture of topics (or themes) that the author intended to discuss. Each topic is defined as a specific probability distribution over all observed words in the document collection, such that words that are strongly associated with the document’s dominant topics have a higher chance of being included within the document. The objective of topic modeling is to find the parameters of the LDA process that has generated the final document or document collection, a process referred to as “inference” in the LDA literature. Among the outputs of the inference is a set of per-word topic distributions associating a probability with every topic-word pair and a similar set of per-topic document distributions describing the probability of choosing a particular topic for every specific document.

A second topic modeling approach is Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA). LSA extracts concepts from observed patterns of word usage in a collection of documents. LSA was first introduced as a distinct information retrieval technique for library indexing (Dumais 2004; Manning et al. 2007) and recently emerged as a topic extraction approach (Evangelopoulos et al. 2012). It is based on the similarity of meanings of words appearing in documents or passages (Foltz et al. 1998) and presents words and documents using vector space modeling that compiles textual data into a term-by-document matrix. The term-by-document matrix shows the weighted frequency of terms in order to represent the documents in the term space. The extraction of topics in LSA is based on the statistical technique of singular value decomposition (SVD), which is closely associated with factor analysis, and represents terms and documents in a space of principal factors (Berry et al. 1995; Deerwester et al. 1990; Landauer 2002). LSA employs truncated singular value decomposition, a unique form of SVD which modifies term frequencies to include only terms of great importance in order to highlight underlying dimensions of the data.

To analyze comments in journalists' and commenters' discussions of human trafficking, we apply Latent Semantic Analysis using SAS Enterprise Miner. We chose LSA over LDA for LSA's considerably faster execution time (a few minutes as opposed to many hours), LSA's unique solution and reproducibility of the results (LSA always produces the same solution given the same data, as opposed to the slightly variable solutions produced in LDA), and the availability of free commercial software for LSA (SAS Enterprise Miner is available free of charge for academic research through the SAS On Demand for Academics program).

Our LSA analysis closely follows the steps outlined in Evangelopoulos et al. (2012), Kulkarni et al. (2014), and Winson-Geideman and Evangelopoulos (2013). Based on the LSA attribute of assessing commonalities within a collection of data, the article and comment

paragraphs were reduced to a series of terms and documents loading on factors that were then translated into eleven topics. Our collection of 13,329 article and comment paragraphs were first converted into a tabulation of term occurrences called a Vector Space Model (Salton 1975). To ensure the accuracy of our language usage patterns and to avoid any computational inefficiencies, we excluded trivial English words (e.g. *the*, *and*, and *of*) as well as obviously irrelevant terms (e.g. first names, *Thai fish industry*, *Jennifer*, *fishmeal*, *fish*, *Croydon*, and *Davies*). We then condensed the terms through the process of linguistic stemming, representing for instance the terms *trafficking*, *trafficked*, *traffic* etc. by the stemmed term *traffic-*.

To promote low-frequency terms and discount high-frequency terms we transformed the term frequencies using a variant of the commonly used term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) transformation, where the raw term frequency of term x in paragraph j , tf_{xj} , is replaced by $w_{xj} = tf_{xj} * idf_x$, where $idf_x = \log(N/n_x)$, N is the total number of abstracts in the collection (here $N = 8794$), and n_x is the total frequency of term x in the entire collection of abstracts (Winson-Geideman and Evangelopoulos 2013: 258).

We next used SAS Enterprise Miner (SAS EM) to extract eleven topics (an arbitrarily chosen manageable number) from our document collection. The topics emerged in the form of multiple descriptive terms accompanied by the paragraphs related to each topic. We coded the eleven topics by combining the quantitative results of the terms weights as produced by SAS EM and the qualitative method of multiple readings and consensus among the researchers after reading each topic's accompanying paragraphs, as suggested in conventional content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005: 1279). We continued our analysis by performing a chi-square test for independence to identify whether article paragraphs and comment paragraphs have similar or different distributions across the eleven topics. We then applied the iterative consensus-building

algorithm created by Winson-Geideman and Evangelopoulos (2013). Using this algorithm we gradually eliminated the rows (appeared topics) that contributed to column dependence so as to achieve a unification of the columns in the contingency table. When an optimal set of rows, which portrays column independence while keeping the number of rows at a maximum, is achieved, the algorithm follows the locally optimal choice at each repetition so as to avoid possible overload from the full enumeration of all possible solutions (Cormen, Leiserson, and Rivest 1996). We used this technique to identify three clusters of topics: (1) topics preferred equally by journalists and commenters, (2) topics preferred by journalists, and (3) topics preferred by commenters (Tables 1-3).

Results

After extracting the 11 topics we compiled a topic-by-document source contingency table (Table 1). We analyzed the cross-tab results with a chi-square test for independence. Testing for independence of rows and columns, a chi-square value equal to 761.469 ($df = 10$, $p < 0.0000$) indicated a significant degree of dependence between topics, articles, and comments (Table 2). We calculated each topic's contribution to the chi-square statistic and found that topic 5, "Opinion about the article," was the most polarizing topic, with a chi-square contribution component of 206.795. We removed that topic and repeated the chi-square test on the remaining nine-by-two table. Since the test was significant again, we identified the next topic that contributed most to distribution differences, and continued this way until we reached a subset of topics that have no difference in preference between journalists and commenters (Table 3).

Table 1. Emerged Topics

Topic	Label	Descriptive Terms	Article Paragraphs	Comment Paragraphs
T01	Sex workers & paid sex	+sex, +worker, +sex worker, +sex industry	309	1161
T02	H.T. as Modern Slavery	+slavery, +slave, modern, +human, +labor	320	709
T03	Police reaction to trafficking in children	+police,uk, +know, +find, +child, +home	375	528
T04	Gender relations in H.T.	+woman, +man, +prostitute,+ prostitution, +sell, +know	347	1228
T05	Opinion about the article	+article, +good, +read, +comment, +point	31	830
T06	Workers and forced labor	+work,+pay, +labor, +force,+worker,uk,+pay	300	1047
T07	Human rights in H.T.	+right, +human, +human right, +government, +abuse	200	578
T08	Generalizations on how people perceive/act towards H.T	+people, +want, +know, +job, +live	195	1269
T09	Government and charity response to H.T.	+government, +project, +poppy, +support, +charity	231	430
T10	Prostitution	+prostitution, +government, +law, +force, +illegal, +prostitute	206	980
T11	HT victims	+traffic,+human,+victim,uk,+woman	785	1270
		TOTAL	3299	10030

Table 2. Chi-square tests for independence

Topic	Label	OBSERVED		EXPECTED		chi-sq component
		Articles	Comments	Articles	Comments	
T01	Sex workers & paid sex	309	1161	363.833	1106.17	10.982
T02	H.T. as Modern Slavery	320	709	254.683	774.32	22.261
T03	Police reaction to trafficking in children	375	528	223.497	679.50	136.479
T04	Gender relations in H.T.	347	1228	389.821	1185.18	6.251
T05	Opinion about the article	31	830	213.102	647.90	206.795
T06	Workers and forced labor	300	1047	333.390	1013.61	4.444
T07	Human rights in HT	200	578	192.559	585.44	0.382

T08	Generalizations on how people perceive/act towards H.T	195	1269	362.348	1101.65	102.710
T09	Government and charity response to H.T.	231	430	163.601	497.40	36.899
T10	Prostitution	206	980	293.541	892.46	34.694
T11	HT victims	785	1270	508.624	1546.38	199.573
SUM		3299	10030	3299	10030	761.469

A. Topics preferred equally by journalists and commenters

The analysis revealed that four main topics were preferred equally by journalists and commenters: (1) Sex workers and paid sex; (2) Gender relations in human trafficking (HT); (3) Workers and forced labor; and (4) Human rights in HT (Table 3).

Table 3. Topics preferred equally by journalists and commenters

Topic	Label	OBSERVED		EXPECTED		chi-sq component
		# of Article §	# of Comment §	# of Article §	# of Comment §	
T01	Sex workers & paid sex	309	1161	328.7	1141.3	1.519
T04	Gender relations in H.T.	347	1228	352.2	1222.8	0.098
T06	Workers and forced labor	300	1047	301.2	1045.8	0.006
T07	Human rights in HT	200	578	174.0	604.0	5.021
SUM		1156	4014	1156	4014	6.644

Notes: The expected article counts were computed based on the null hypothesis of independence between articles and comments, as part of the chi-square test calculations of the iterative process. With a chi-square statistic equal to 6.644 (df = 3, p= 0.0841), a set of topics that were equally preferred by both sources was identified.

1. *Sex workers and paid sex*: This topic was discussed by both journalists and commenters. Discussion focused excessively on the distinction between “voluntary” and “involuntary” sex work. Both readers and journalists mentioned about the necessity of a clear identification of the different types of sex working and how these may or may not be coerced. For example, one commenter suggests:

“There are two types who are sex workers: those who are there because they genuinely chose to be and those who were coerced. Respect their choice or not, the former have made a choice and should be protected and regulated” (C0675).

Within academia the discussion on voluntary versus involuntary sex work has not yet reached a consensus: several scholars argue that coercion cannot function as a distinguishing factor between the types of sex working (coerced vs voluntary) since, as they claim, all acts of sex working are necessarily exploitative and involuntary (Gulcur and Ilkcaracan 2002; Jeffreys 1999; Kelly 2003). The opponents of this notion assert that individuals can voluntarily participate in the global sex industry and can only be considered as trafficking victims when they are forced to work in sexual servitude (Busza 2004; Murray 1998). Others, such as Doezema (2002, 1999, 1998), argue that this division has allowed international organizations that seek to abolish prostitution to deny voluntary sex workers their human rights.

2. *Gender relations.* Numerous scholars suggest there is division in terms of the gender inequities involved in the human trafficking process: women and girls are the vast majority of the victims of most human trafficking activity, while men appear to be the victimizers or “the clients” (McCarthy 2014; Brysk and Choi-Fitzpatrick 2012). Dowler and his colleagues have identified gender as an important ingredient in the portrayal of any type of crime through the following paradox: media frequently consider female victims responsible for their victimization while at the same time trying to present them as “innocent, virtuous and honourable” (Dowler et al. 2006: 841). Thus it is not surprising that both journalists and commenters discussed gender relations when discussing human trafficking.

3. *Workers and forced labor:* Even though some scholars argue that media underrepresent stories about labor trafficking on the basis that they are not as marketable as are stories about sex trafficking (Haynes 2006: 355), our analysis found that both journalists and commenters discussed forced labor resulting from human trafficking.

4. *Human rights in HT*: Human trafficking is often discussed by scholars, governments and civil society organizations as a human rights violation. The emergence of the particular topic by both journalists and commenters reflects their concerns about the conceptualized framework of human trafficking. As Gallagher argues, a human rights-based approach when discussing the issue of human trafficking, highlights the importance of formulating policies and programs whose main focus and objective is the promotion and protection of rights (Gallagher 2012: 173).

B. Topics preferred by journalists

We found that four topics were preferred by journalists more than commenters (Table 4), including: (1) human trafficking victims; (2) police reaction to child trafficking; (3) government and charity response to HT; and (4) HT as modern slavery.

1. *Human trafficking victims*: Many scholars have noted the media's preference for portraying crime victims (e.g. Greer 2007; Höijer 2004), and our analysis showed that indeed journalists discuss trafficking victims, particularly women, children, and workers, more so than commenters do. Numerous scholars have identified the media's preference on portraying stories of crime victims (Höijer 2004, Greer 2007). The discussion on the topic of trafficking in children and human trafficking victims confirms the general notion that media place an inordinate focus on the vulnerability of the victims and on crimes that include elements regarding sex, sexuality, and gender (Haynes 2006).

2. *Police reaction to child trafficking*: This was the only topic where actions of law enforcement were presented and were connected to the specific type of trafficking in children. Journalists discussed about the police's performance in identifying incidents of human trafficking, and specifically of child trafficking. Media often report on proactive police activity so as to promote the image of the police as effective and efficient investigators of crime (Surette 1998). However, when it comes to human trafficking, findings suggest that the numbers of human

trafficking cases identified by the police are low. This could be partially attributed to agency leaders who do not perceive trafficking as a problem in their community, and to a lack of training and guidance to prepare officers to identify and investigate these cases (Farrell et al. 2010:225).

3. *Government and charity responses to human trafficking.* The third topic discussed by journalists expanded on how governments, and the British government specifically, respond to human trafficking. In the United Kingdom the passage of the Sexual Offenses Act (2003) and the Asylum and Immigration Act (2004) expanded the definition of trafficking, increased the maximum penalty for sex trafficking and increased the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies (Gulati 2010). These and other government acts brought human trafficking into the spotlight for the *Guardian*'s journalists.

4. *Modern slavery.* *Guardian*'s journalists discuss human trafficking as a form of modern slavery. As Wasileski and Miller claim: "*Describing human trafficking as modern-day slavery constitutes influential and evocative wording that draws rapid attention to the need for the public and governments to act to end it*" (Wasileski and Miller 2012). Consequently, the emergence of this topic indicates that journalists approach the subject with some awareness on human trafficking current practices.

Table 4: Topics preferred by journalists

	Preferred article topics	OBSERVED		EXPECTED	
		# of Article §	# of Comment §	# of Article §	# of Comment §
T11	HT victims	785	1270	508.6	1546.4
T03	Police reaction to trafficking in children	375	528	215.3	687.7
T09	Government and charity response to H.T.	231	430	157.2	503.8
T02	H.T. as Modern Slavery	320	709	234.4	794.6
	SUM	1711	2937	1115.5	3532.5

C. Topics preferred by commenters

Three topics were preferred by *The Guardian*'s commenters (Table 5), including: (1) *opinion about the article*; (2) *how people perceive and/or act towards human trafficking*; and (3) *Prostitution*. The *opinion about the article* topic makes sense because online news comments are generally produced by the most opinionated readers (see Lee and Jang 2010, 2012), and we also observed that many commenters began their comments with some kind of general opinion about the article.

The second topic preferred by *The Guardian*'s readers involved generalizations about *how people perceive and/or act towards either human trafficking or prostitution*. This topic involves ethical and quasi-philosophical discussions of human nature and of evil (see Weitzer 2007).

The third topic preferred by commenters was related to *Prostitution*. It is since 1800 that traffic in human beings stood for the procurement of persons against their will by using force, deceit or drugs for the purpose of prostitution (Walkowitz 1992:247). The same notion follows today's practices of human trafficking as well. The current United Nations' definition specifically clarifies that the purpose of exploitation as the main element in human trafficking practices shall include, at minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others (United Nations definition). This is an interesting result when considering the fact that the topic of *Sex workers & paid sex* was emerged both in the journalists and readers' preferred topics of discussion while the topic of *Prostitution* was mainly discussed by the readers. This could be indicative of the readers' understanding of the conceptual distinction between prostitution and sex working: prostitution is just one form of sex work while sex work may refer to a variety of practices such as stripping, phone sex or pornography for example (Ditmore 2011, Farley 2006).

Table 5. Topics preferred by commenters

	Preferred comment topics	OBSERVED		EXPECTED	
		# of Article §	# of Comment §	# of Article §	# of Comment §
T05	Opinion about the article	31	830	213.1	647.9
T08	Generalizations on how people perceive/act towards H.T	195	1269	324.5	1139.5
T10	Prostitution	206	980	254.1	931.9
	SUM	432	3079	791.8	2719.2

Discussion and conclusions

Online news platforms and social media play a major role in setting the public agenda on the issue of human trafficking, which is an underreported crime that is a low priority for authorities in many countries (Laczko and Gramegna 2003). Because little is known about the relations between news coverage of human trafficking and audiences' reactions to and interpretations of such coverage, in this paper we have examined journalists' and commenters' topic choices in coverage of and discussions about human trafficking. We used Latent Semantic Analysis to identify eleven topics discussed by both journalists and readers of *The Guardian* and analyzed each topic in terms of the degree to which journalists and readers converge or else diverge in their topic preferences.

We found that overall there were more topics on which journalists and readers diverged (7) than converged (4). The four topics that were preferred equally by journalists and commenters were *Sex workers & paid sex*; *Gender relations in H.T*; *Workers and forced labor*; and *Human rights in HT*. The perhaps more interesting findings were that *Guardian* commenters did not prefer to discuss *victims* of human trafficking, not even in an equal level with the journalists (see Barnett et al. 2007; Haynes 2006) despite the scholars' assertions on how popular are the stories related to the victimization of vulnerable groups of people (Haynes 2006, Barnett et al 2007).

Also, the distinction between the topics of *prostitution* and *sex work and paid sex*, and the further discussion of voluntary versus involuntary sex work, indicates a need for researchers to perhaps pay more attention to specific conceptual definitions used by the public and journalists.

Taken as a whole these results suggest that neither of the two theoretical approaches of “agenda setting” and the “active audience” can on their own adequately explain the discussion between *The Guardian’s* journalist and commenters. There were some topic discussions that were better explained by “agenda setting” (the four converging ones) and some that are better explained by an “active audience” approach. In the case of *The Guardian*, journalists and their editors set the agenda about online discussions on human trafficking, and this agenda setting is reflected in the four discussion topics that were preferred equally by journalists and readers. But this agenda setting was limited, as readers preferred to discuss three topics that were not preferred by journalists, and readers did not prefer to discuss four other topics that were preferred by journalists. Theories of active audiences help us to understand these seven topics (or subtopics within the topic of human trafficking). The two theories are of course not mutually exclusive: journalists do set the agenda for public discussions of human trafficking, but audiences can actively and creatively interpret what they are reading, and through comment platforms potentially change the direction of the discussion and the content that is read by large numbers of viewers.

There are several limitations of the present study that should be mentioned. The fact that the analysis is based only on *The Guardian* limits the generalizability of our findings. Our results might have been different if we had analyzed articles and comments from a different newspaper or if we had included multiple online newspapers. Our analysis is also limited to the years 2009-2014. The landscape might have been different in the addition of articles from other years. As a

follow-up study, it would also be interesting to examine whether journalists in 2015 covered topics raised by commenters in previous years. A recent case study examining the influence of Facebook audience participation on the news agenda revealed a positive correlation between stories discussed on the Rachel Maddow Show's Facebook page and the subsequent airing of stories on television (Jacobson 2013). An analysis along these lines could also provide some insight into whether and to what extent there is any ongoing dialogue between journalists and commenters on the topic of human trafficking. Finally, from the present study there was a number of articles excluded either because they did not allow comments on the respective webpage (154 articles), or because they did not have sufficient number of comments to be included in our dataset (61 articles that had only 0-3 comments). It will be interesting in the future to examine the emerged topics from both of these categories, given that a larger dataset from more years and/or multiple newspaper sources will be added.

Still, at a minimum our present study demonstrates that topic extraction tools can be used for research on media coverage of crime, and in this case specifically on the relations between media coverage of human trafficking, readers' reactions to this coverage, and the discussions that result from online interactions between journalists and their readers. Also, the exploration and identification of how human trafficking is portrayed by the media, and how the public perceives and reacts to these depictions, provides a significant platform of information that can assist in formulating cohesive human trafficking policies. Farrell and Fahy's research (2009) on public frames on human trafficking and policy responses in the US, showed that public framing of trafficking has changed over time so as to reflect the political prioritization of each period. At the same time, the frames through which problems are portrayed and understood shape the related policy responses. Therefore, when human trafficking was framed as a humans rights issue in the

1990's in the United States, policies were found to be supportive of the victims of human trafficking, whereas at the turn of the century and even more so after 9/11 human trafficking was redefined as a "*crime problem with national security implications*" which demanded criminal justice and national security responses (Farrell and Fahy 2009: 623). Taking it a step further, the introduction of the active audience's participation, as analyzed in our study, shows how the examination of the discussion between journalists and audiences has the potential to redefine the public perception on the types of human trafficking, clarify the differences among them and draw attention to the necessity of different policy reactions to each of the human trafficking types and the - often conflated with the human trafficking issues - voluntary prostitution and sex working.

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